

Creating a Literacy Environment for Boys

Ideas for Teachers, Administrators, and Parents

Christopher M. Spence, Ph.D.

Draft Sample Manuscript

THOMSON
—★—
NELSON

CONTENTS

PREFACE	0
FOREWORD	0
1 The Top Five Reasons Why Boys Struggle with Reading	00
2 Assessing Reading Literacy	00
3 Boys to Men	00
4 Instructional Leadership in the Classroom	00
5 Organizational Leadership in the School	00
6 Administrative Leadership in the Community	00
7 Gender-Based Learning Environments	00
Appendix: What Boys Want to Read	00
Professional References	00
Literature Bibliography	00
Index	00

FOREWORD

.....

Jalen is a boy in Grade 4. When asked what he thinks about people who read a lot, he says, “They need to get a life. I can think of more fun things to do than to just sit there.” Ask him about reading, and he adds, “I don’t like having to read for school. When I get to choose, it’s all right, [but] I would only choose the good stuff.”

When it comes to reading and writing, boys perform more poorly than girls all across Canada. Similar statistics can be found in over thirty other countries. In comparing boys and girls, boys

- ◆ say they are less committed to school.
- ◆ don’t read as many books.
- ◆ are more likely to be held back in school, suspended from school, and drop out of school.
- ◆ are three times more likely to be in special education classes.
- ◆ are four times more likely to be diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- ◆ are more successful in committing suicide, even though more girls make the attempt.

(Heyman, 2003)

These are quite alarming facts.

But are boys really poor learners? Is there not something we, as educators and parents, can do to motivate more boys to become successful students? Does the disproportion of at-risk boys in the learning environment not say something about the way they are taught? Children, I believe, are natural learners. Given a chance, they will try to understand and use what we teach them.

So where have we gone wrong? Why does an otherwise successful boy like Jalen, who in every non-school aspect seems like

a successful individual, feel that he's not getting "the good stuff" in school?

I was inspired to write this book by the birth of my son, Jacob. I want to give him opportunities to learn that were lacking when I was young. I want him to be part of a successful learning environment where being a boy isn't a handicap. I believe the school system needs to address how it is educating the young males of our society. There has certainly been enough research to show that boys and girls learn differently. At the same time, numerous studies have concluded that the school curriculum and many teachers do not take these gender learning and behavioural differences into account. What I offer to this discussion comes from my experiences as a teacher and administrator. I have taught, counselled, and mentored boys throughout my career. And, of course, I was a boy once myself.

My parents were from Jamaica, but I was born in England. There, soccer was my passion and the sports pages were my reading, and my brother's. Like so many young boys, we were more interested in becoming sports heroes than in being the teachers' favourites. I spent more time every evening reading the sports pages to my parents than I did with the books my teachers wanted me to read. My brother and I collected, organized, compared, and traded sports cards. No one ever told us that we were learning important literacy skills.

When I was 8 and my family moved to Canada, I discovered *Sports Illustrated* in the local library and became an avid reader. The magazine was the gift of choice for my brother and me. I also discovered that I was very good at playing soccer. The game brought meaning to my young life and gave me confidence to become successful academically and socially. Eventually, I earned an athletic scholarship to Simon Fraser University, starred as a running back on the football team, and received a degree in

criminology. After graduation, I was drafted by the B.C. Lions of the Canadian Football League. When an injury ended my career three years later, I began working with young people in group homes and detention and treatment centres. These experiences eventually led me into teaching Grade 6. I spent many of my teaching years in middle-school classrooms, and eventually became a principal and superintendent.

I was just a typical boy. I preferred physical activity to sitting and listening to adults. I wanted to read about real people doing real things instead of made-up stories about imaginary people. I wanted to be praised and accepted for who I was, not for who other people expected me to be.

From my work with young offenders to my years as a teacher, principal, and superintendent, I have always had the desire to reach out to young people—especially boys—before they become failures in the school system. I know from the important part reading played in my early years that literacy is key to their success. I also know that like so many boys, I had to be physically motivated—not just intellectually stimulated—to learn.

As educators, we strive to ensure that every student has an equal opportunity to acquire learning skills and knowledge. We know from years of research the influence of gender learning styles and teaching methods. It's time to put this research into practice. Many boys learn differently than the majority of girls, especially in the area of literacy. Let's give these boys a chance to succeed.

THE TOP FIVE REASONS WHY BOYS STRUGGLE WTH READING

“Reading success is the foundation for achievement throughout the school years. There is a critical window of opportunity from ages four to seven for learning to read.”
(Early Reading Strategy, 2003)

The Top Five Reasons Why Boys Struggle with Reading

- ◆ Gender issues in the classroom disadvantage boys.
- ◆ There are few male role models of good readers.
- ◆ Biology influences how boys learn to read.
- ◆ Boys do not exhibit “good” classroom behaviour.
- ◆ There is little choice in what boys have to read.

Figure 1

Struggling and reluctant readers don't learn to read well for a variety of reasons, five of which I have listed above. There are others: limited home support for literacy, parents may be struggling readers, poverty, physical or mental disabilities, second-language problems, or simply missing school at a critical time. Regardless of the reason, it is important to be able to recognize what makes struggling readers remain reluctant to read. Teachers

have no control over what goes on outside the school, but we can change the way reading is taught in the classroom.

How can you spot struggling or reluctant readers? They may

- ◆ sit in the back of the classroom or as far away from the teacher as they can get.
- ◆ disrupt the class during silent reading or when someone is speaking.
- ◆ get out of their seats when they are supposed to be silently reading.
- ◆ seem angry or upset—or simply refuse—when asked to read aloud.
- ◆ complain that all the reading material is “boring.”

And more than likely, they may be boys.

Not all reluctant readers are boys, and not all girls are excellent readers. Children with reading difficulties are individuals, and each fits somewhere on a continuum, from those who can't read at all to those whose reading levels are many grades higher than the norm. So it is important for educators to ask: Which boys and which girls have problems with reading? Otherwise, they run the risk of instituting one-size-fits-all classroom reforms that can create more problems than they solve.

During the 1970s and '80s, there was a trend to ignore the differences between girls and boys. Educators believed that all children should be treated equally, and that they learn in the same way (Sommers, 2000). But we need to recognize that boys learn differently from girls. More importantly, we need to understand why so many boys are unable or unwilling to become successfully literate in school.

Gender Issues in the Classroom Disadvantage Boys

One Size Fits All?

Treating boys and girls equally in the classroom has probably been contentious since the beginning of co-educational school systems. In the past, “hard” subjects, such as the physical sciences, math, and those requiring strength and manual dexterity, were commonly considered male subjects. “Soft” subjects—which are often language-based—such as English, social studies, and sciences without a heavy math foundation, were considered female subjects. This educational culture was comfortable in pre-determining both what boys and girls should learn and what they should be good at learning.

I would certainly not advocate returning to that model of education! However, a case can be made that our educational institutions have replaced the traditional male/female division

◆ “Many British educational leaders believe that the modern classroom fails boys by being too unstructured, too permissive, and too hostile to the spirit of competition that so often provides boys with the incentive to learn and excel.” (Sommers, 2000, 160)

with a one-size-fits-all model in which *all* students are expected to learn the same way. In this model, since all students are thought to be equal in learning ability and to act and think the same way, all students are expected to achieve similar levels of competency. As Smith and Wilhelm found in their

research (2002, 100): “Teachers do not want an individualistic child.... They want everybody to be in a seat listening to what they say so that they don’t have any problems, worries, or troubles. They want a collective. They want everybody to be that one model student....” But many boys don’t fit this profile of a model student.

Research has shown that boys typically like competition and thrive on it, while girls are more co-operative. Many boys

respond well to a classroom environment that is active and structured. They benefit from small-group instruction, clear expectations, and behavioural limits. They need frequent changes in activities and opportunities to burn off excess energy. While some girls also fit this pattern, many are more able to work independently. Many girls participate successfully in small-group discussions, are more self-directed, have little difficulty with open-ended tasks and expectations, and are more able than boys to sit and concentrate for long periods of time (Heyman, 2003, 7–9; Sommers, 2000).

Because boys are often more task oriented than many girls, they like to problem solve: they like to know what the problem is and then get on with solving it. Girls are interested in solving problems, too, but they go about it differently. Girls are more likely to begin by talking about the issue, and entertain the possibility that there might be more than one solution. Neither approach is better or worse. They are just different—the way boys and girls are different.

The Change in Teacher Demographics

Why don't boys like to read in school? As Hyatt noted (2002), "None of the boys had a dislike for literacy. They only rejected school literacy." And what is wrong with "school literacy"? Perhaps part of the answer lies in the changing proportion of male and female teachers in the last decades. Once, students in middle schools and high schools encountered primarily male teaching staff. Now, not only in the early grades but in high school as well, they find mostly female teachers. Where male ideas of gender stereotypes once influenced the way girls were taught, now female ideas of learning and classroom behaviour are imposed on boys. This is especially true in the area of literacy.

Today many educators recognize that the imbalance of male and female teachers has inadvertently created a learning culture

where the male voice is seldom heard. The research that connects the decline in literacy of male students with the decline in the number of male educators is alarming (*Narrowing the Gender Gap: Attracting Men to Teaching*, 5). For example:

◆ In the Ontario Grade 3 and 6 Assessments of Reading,

◆ “When I taught Grade 2, I was the only male teacher (except for the gym teacher) in the primary division. This isn’t unusual. Seventy-five percent of elementary school teachers in the U.S. are women, while the percentage of female elementary teacher-librarians is close to 80[%].” (Scieszka, 2003, 17–18)

Writing, and Mathematics for 2003–2004, a larger percentage of girls than boys performed at or above the Grade 3 and 6 provincial standards in reading, writing, and mathematics. In Grade 3 reading, 59% of girls and 48% of boys performed at or above the provincial standard. In both Grade 3 and 6 reading, twice as many girls achieved level 4 as

boys. As well, more boys than girls were assessed at levels 1 and 2. (EQAO, 2004).

- ◆ While boys entering school in Canada made up about 50% of the school population in 1999–2000, 10% more females graduated high school than did males. In 1999, boys were nearly one and a half times more likely to leave school before graduation than girls (*Education Indicators in Canada*, 2003).
- ◆ In the ten years from 1989/90 to 1999/2000, census data shows that the percentage of full-time male educators in Canada dropped from 41% of the work force to 35%. The percentage of young male educators was even lower, accounting for just 22% of educators aged 20 to 29. With 40% of male educators aged 50 years or older in 2000, and the rate of males entering the profession, female educators may soon outnumber their male co-workers by as much as four to one (*ibid.*). An article in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* suggests that these demographics may be affecting children’s attitudes. A group of mostly male students, when “asked if they would

like to be teachers,... responded with a guffaw that filled the room. Not a chance [they said]" (Mitchell, 2004).

These trends are not just restricted to Canada. Similar statistics can be found in the United States and around the world. In a 2001 survey of the fifteen countries of the European Union, for example, significantly more females than males were in school by the age of 18. In England, the rate was nearly 10% higher for girls. In Ireland, the difference was as great as 27% more girls than boys in school at age 18. For twenty-one of the twenty-nine countries surveyed by UNESCO, women accounted for 60% of all educators (UNESCO, 2001). In Canada, the rate is about 65%.

Not surprisingly, the increasing proportion of female educators has created an educational culture that affects the school environment—from the physical set-up of the classroom to the way subjects are taught. There is an increasing emphasis on cooperation instead of competition and on an open-ended, discussion-based teaching and learning style.

These approaches to education do have value. Boys as well as girls need to work co-operatively. They need to develop their ability to think laterally. They need to be able to work for extended periods of time on a single task until it is successfully completed. But they also need a learning environment that gives each student—male or female—a fair chance of learning these skills. Students need educators to acknowledge that not all styles of learning are necessarily natural to all types of students.

There Are Few Male Role Models of Good Readers

When boys have predominantly female teachers—teachers who read to them, talk about reading, and encourage them to read—it is not remarkable that they assume that reading is essentially a

female activity. In support of this notion, they also see mostly female school librarians (Sokol, 2002). Boys are more likely to see their mothers reading than their fathers (Millard, 1997, 83),

◆ “[Critical literacy] translates into boys actively connecting with the written material by asking critical questions about accuracy, relevance, bias, truth, defects, and politics of a piece of writing.” (Hawkes, 2001, 110)

and notice that it is the girls of their own age who are often avid readers. No wonder so many boys conclude that reading is basically not a “boy thing.”

In fact, many researchers feel that schools encourage more girls to read than boys simply through

this de facto modelling. As Sciesika points out (2002c), “We tell boys that reading is important and that reading is for everyone; however, we show boys that reading is just for girls.” William Pollack (1998, 147–149) has found that boys feel pressure not only to appear masculine, but also to not appear feminine. Boys who exhibit “feminine” behaviours, such as tenderness, compassion, empathy, and love of reading, are often considered soft by their peers, and may suffer ridicule or even violence. I have seen how some boys live in a narrowly defined world of masculinity in which everything they do or think is judged on the basis of the strength or weakness it represents. Many adolescent boys think that it is “cool to be the fool,” and that academic success based on reading is for geeks.

As a teacher and administrator trying to engage boys in learning, I have had to deal with what Pollack has called the “boy code”:

- ◆ “*The Sturdy Oak*—men should be stoic, stable and independent...never show weakness.”
- ◆ “*Give ’em Hell*—the stance...of extreme daring, bravado, and attraction to violence.”
- ◆ “*The Big Wheel*—the need to achieve status, dominance, and power.”

- ◆ “*No Sissy Stuff*—the gender straitjacket that prohibits boys from expressing feelings or urges seen (mistakenly) as feminine....” (Pollack, 1998, 24–25)

The Report of the Expert Panel in Literacy in Grades 4 to 6 in Ontario concluded that students “need to see the connections between who they are, what they value, and what they are learning in school in order to make sense of the learning and integrate it into their whole being” (*Literacy for Learning*, 2004, 18).

Children need to see connections in the real world between themselves and the activity of reading. Girls see their literacy connections in their teachers, peers, and mothers who read. Similarly, boys need to see men at home as well as male teachers and administrators—or visitors to the classroom such as local athletes—demonstrate their interest in reading. As Dorothy Stickland, Kathy Ganske, and Joanne Monroe point out (2003, 18), “Teachers who serve as inspiring models of reading and writing are passionate about their own literacy.” Boys as well as girls deserve to see inspiring models who are passionate about reading.

Biology Influences How Boys Learn to Read

Some educators have attempted to transform the classroom into a genderless learning environment in the belief that the differences between men and women are culturally, not biologically, determined. Olga Silverstein, in her book *The Courage to Raise Good Men* (1994), describes her view of what forms men and women: “Though we may think it ageless and immutable, our conception of what constitutes the ideal man is cultural-bound” (*ibid.*, 40). She argues that boys *learn* to be more restless in a classroom than girls, more delayed in language development and ability compared to girls, more competitive and aggressive than girls. Society, she says, has created the strong, silent male and the weak, emotional female.

However, in many gender-neutral classrooms the playing field is not a level one. Pollack’s “boy code” still prevails. Boys are proportionally more disruptive than girls—*the aggressive male*. Boys do not like to read fiction that is grounded in emotion and characterization—*the strong, unemotional male*. Boys have a hard time working co-operatively when there are no clear goals established—*the competitive male*. In the

◆ “To a 12-year-old boy, an Abrahms M1 battle tank [used in the invasion of Iraq] with a 120 mm cannon featuring a DRS Technologies second-generation GEN II TIS thermal-imaging gunner’s sight, steel-encased, depleted-uranium armour, 12.7 mm Browning M2 machine gun, and with an L8A1 six-barreled smoke grenade discharger fitted on each side of the turret, is unutterably cool.” (Wilson, *Quill & Quire*, April 2005)

past, this “boy behaviour” was considered natural. Today, if boys display these stereotypical behaviours, they may be considered deviant, slow learners, or even ADD candidates (Pollack 1998).

That is not to suggest that the strong, silent male and the weak, emotional female—whether culturally determined or not—is a good model for our children to follow. It can lead to overly aggressive males and abused women. There are nearly

ten times more men incarcerated in Canada than women (*Women in Prison*, 2002), and over five times more women assaulted by men than men attacked by women (Statistics Canada, 2003). But recent research suggests that there are differences between boys and girls that are not caused by culturally inspired gender behaviour. They are, rather, “hard wired” in children’s brains. These biological differences can profoundly affect the way children learn to read and their chances of success in school.

Research on sex differences has been controversial. In the middle 1990s, Gloria Steinem lashed out at sex difference research as “anti-American.... It is what is keeping us down” (as quoted in Sommers, 2000, 89). Educational researchers have also

questioned whether these differences impede boys' literacy as much as family and societal influences: "...educators and parents can actively shape social worlds of youth and foster literacy development, rather than remain resigned to the notion that biology is destiny in literacy" (Gambel and Hunter, 2000, 689–719).

I would suggest that throwing the ball back into the behavioural court is not going to achieve positive results in the teaching of literacy. There are basic biological differences between boys and girls. Some of these differences make it difficult for boys to learn to read.

Brain Development

The brains of girls develop faster than boys'. Researcher Leonard Sax claims that "the brain of a six year-old boy looks like the brain of a four year-old girl; the brain of a seventeen year-old boy looks like the brain of an eleven year-old girl; men don't catch up with women until they are 30 and in some areas [of brain development] they never catch up (Sax, 2002, 4).

◆ "Experts suggest that too much dependency on electronic devices adversely affects a boy's attention span and imagination, and his proficiency in reading and writing, because it under stimulates the whole brain and over stimulates the right brain...." (Heyman, 2003, 150)

Research has also suggested that girls are more aware of the world around them than boys are. They are able to take in and process "more sensory and emotive data, and more quickly than the male" (Gurian, 1998, 183). It is little wonder that girls are better than boys at figuring out the school system when they enter

kindergarten and Grade 1. They can see it, sense it, anticipate it. At the same age, many boys are just learning to share. Researchers have also found that girls' brains not only develop

faster than boys', girls appear to use more of their brains to do certain tasks, such as problem solving (Biddulph, 1997, 58).

Brain development affects language acquisition. Although it is unwise to overgeneralize on research that is still in development, researchers have found that girls have more neural connections between both sides of their brains and a better developed left brain than boys. It is in the left side of the brain that language activity lies (Heyman, 2003).

Here is a summary of some of the generalizations in male and female brain development that researchers believe they have discovered:

Male and Female Brain Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Girls have stronger connections than boys among all the areas of the brain.◆ Boys' brains respond more quickly to control movement associated with a sudden stimulus.◆ The language centres in the brain develop earlier in girls.◆ Boys have a more direct connection between their spinal cord and brain, allowing them to respond more quickly to physical danger.◆ The area in the brain that controls speech is more active in girls.◆ Boys and girls differ in how their brains process data and interpret sensory and bodily information.◆ Girls appear to have a larger memory storage area in their brains. <p><i>(ibid., 7–9)</i></p>

Figure 2

Educators do not need extensive research to see that girls use and acquire language more fluently than do boys the same age.

Hand a four-year-old girl a car to play with and she will probably give it a name, imagine the car's personality, and invent a story for it. This activity is language-based, with the car serving as a language stimulator for words, emotions, and ideas. Give a four-year-old boy a car and he will probably make car noises, be more interested in its speed and direction than its personality, and name his car, "Car."

Since boys are more right brain oriented than girls, integrating spatial tasks with learning to read can help them develop "good patterning and language" skills (Gurian, 2001, 111–112). Educational publications that discuss the teaching of literacy skills to boys, such as *Me Read? No Way!* (2004), acknowledge these skills by encouraging the use of "graphic organizers and other visual tools" as "a useful means of demonstrating the relationships between things, both spatially and conceptually" (*ibid.*, 19).

Hearing

Girls are able to hear two to four times better than boys, depending on the frequency tested. This difference is present as early as children can be reliably tested (Cassidy, 2001; Wesson, 1997). This gender disparity has important implications in today's classrooms when it comes to boys. If a female teacher has a soft voice, the boys in the back of the room may not pay much attention to what she is saying. They probably cannot hear her very well. Conversely, if a male teacher, who may have a louder voice, is speaking, a girl in the front of the class may feel he is practically yelling at her.

Considering how young children hear can help a teacher create an equitable learning environment for both boys and girls. Perhaps boys should take the front seats in classrooms and girls sit in the back if the teacher has a soft voice. If students are grouped around tables, teachers could walk around the room

when speaking so that all children have the same chance of hearing what is said.

Seeing

Picture a darkened classroom where a student is doing a presentation using overhead transparencies. Most of the girls are watching the screen with interest, but many of the boys are paying little attention. Are the boys uncooperative? Not necessarily. Likely, the girls can see the screen better than they can. Researchers have discovered that females have better vision in dim rooms, whereas males see better in bright light (Gurian, 2001, 30). But the differences in vision between males and females are more fundamental than that.

Because the retinas of boys and girls develop so differently, they see the world in different ways. Researchers Jennifer Connellan and associates at Cambridge University studied newborn babies to see if there were gender differences in what they preferred to look at. One hundred and two babies were videotaped on the day they were born. Next to each baby was a young, smiling woman and a mobile that moved. Neither the woman nor the mobile made any noise, and observers didn't know the sex of the newborn. The observations suggested that boy babies were more interested in the mobile, while girls were more likely to look at the smiling face, and that these reactions are biological, not behavioural (Connellan, Baron-Cohen, and associates, 2000).

Not surprisingly, these differences affect the performance and behaviour of school children. For example, because kindergarten boys are inclined to see the world in terms of things that move, they are likely “to simulate motion in their pictures” (Sax, 2005, 21). Girls of the same age more often draw people, animals, and plants. “Psychologist Donna Tuman summarizes the difference

[in the way boys and girls represent the world] this way: girls draw nouns, boys draw verbs” (*ibid.*, 24). Boys often like dull colours such as black, grey, and blue; girls prefer the warm colours—red, orange, and green. Thus when children draw, the boys’ actions scenes are dark and, especially at a kindergarten age, may appear as scribbling. The girls’ faces and people are usually brightly coloured and symmetrical (*ibid.*, 18–25). Without understanding the different ways boys and girls view and represent the world, it is easy to make faulty assumptions about their abilities and behaviour.

Hormones

Boys and girls are neither biological machines, nor socialized stereotypical automatons. They are complex beings who are constantly changing and growing. One of the main factors for change is growth hormones: in the male, testosterone; in the female, estrogen and progesterone.

While there are a number of misconceptions about male and female hormones, most researchers agree that hormones have some effect on the way children behave in a group or class setting. When boys begin to experience levels of testosterone, they become more active. When these levels are high, they may do “better on spatial exams, like math tests, but worse on verbal tests” (Gurian, 2001, 29). Competition can increase testosterone levels in both boys and girls, although boys’ base levels are higher than girls’. Thus boys, on average, are often more competitive than girls, prefer group sports activities to individual ones, and are more inclined than girls to need to belong to a hierarchical peer group.

Girls can also be naturally competitive. The recent rise in girls’ hockey and soccer teams across Canada is proof of their desire to compete. But few researchers would deny that it is a

matter of degree when it comes to male and female competitiveness, especially in adolescents. Some of that behaviour has to be attributed to male hormonal changes. Indeed, it has been found that when girls have more testosterone, they also become more aggressive than they normally would be (Gurian, 2001).

Boys Do Not Exhibit “Good” Classroom Behaviour

Sit Still! Be Quiet!

Boys like to be bad; girls like to be good! Of course, this is an oversimplification of school behaviour. But I have encountered many examples of boys in my teaching career that illustrate what researchers have found: acting “cool” for boys often means protesting against school and school work (Mills, 2001; Duncan, 1999). This behaviour cannot merely be explained by biology or the societal expectations of what it means to be male. Educators have to look at what boys bring to a classroom and what the classroom offers boys.

As Gambell and Hunter and others have found in their research, “boys arrive at school as active, aggressive and independent, but must adjust to a school environment that values quietness, passivity and conformity. When teachers are not able to meet males’ need for attention, boys go from calling out to acting out, adopting a bad boy role...” (Gambel and Hunter, 2000, 696). Imagine a quiet little girl arriving in a kindergarten classroom where the norm is to run around and make a great deal of noise, use hammers to pound on pieces of wood during class break times, and compete for just about everything and in every situation in the class to see who is the best.

The classroom that boys encounter in school is as extreme to them as that rowdy kindergarten would be to most girls. This is what the educational environment asks of boys in class:

- ◆ that they raise their hands if they have a question and *sit still and be quiet* for the answer.
- ◆ that they refrain from stereotypical boyish behaviour—roughhousing and aggressive competition—and sit *still and be quiet*.
- ◆ that they curb their desire to move around and talk during class lessons—and *sit still and be quiet*.
- ◆ that if they will only *sit still and be quiet*, they can stay out of trouble and get on the teachers’ “good side.”
- ◆ that they shouldn’t complain if they can’t play rough sports at recess such as dodge ball; and if they do complain, they should at least *sit still and be quiet* as the teacher explains why.

Every student is expected to sit still to listen, to read, to solve problems, to do school work independently or in groups. All this sitting still would not be a bad thing if it were easy and natural. Unfortunately, for many boys, sitting still is not a normal phenomenon.

Bad Boys, Good Girls

In my experience, boys are usually physical and emotionally transparent, and sometimes enjoy being “bad.” I only needed to be absent from my middle-school classroom for one day to get proof of this behaviour. I would come back to horror stories of how bad the boys had been. It was as if they could not control themselves and took great pleasure in making the substitute teacher’s day miserable. In contrast to these complaints would be the glowing reports of how helpful and pleasant the girls were. But it wasn’t because the girls were not taking advantage of my absence. They were quietly going against the substitute’s wishes. After all, that is what most students do when their teachers are

away. The difference was *how* the boys and girls were bad. The girls' behaviour, though no better than the boys', was much more subtle, less physical and boisterous, and thus perceived as "good."

Boys, like girls, need incentives to be successful at school. They need to interact in a positive way with their teachers and the other students. When their interactions are more often negative, the wrong type of behaviour gets reinforced. Boys do get more attention than girls in the classroom, but these interactions come about because of discipline and class management issues. Boys are more likely than girls to engage in disruptive behaviour and be off-task (Gambell and Hunter, 2000).

Boys get their sense of self from personal achievement. My son is living proof of this. Jacob is a fast moving, high-intensity little boy. He brings energy, initiative, and a daring disposition to seemingly everything he does. Jacob is quick to discover and try anything new and insists on doing everything himself. He seems to be "wired" for self-reliance. Many of the boys I have taught over the years were very similar. Even if they didn't understand a concept or a lesson, they often resisted help. They had to understand it themselves or not at all.

Girls, on the other hand, typically get their sense of self from relationships. Asking for help is a way to build bridges to others. When a girl is offered help, she may feel loved and valued. My daughter Briana, for example, is very much into relationship building, even at her age of five. Compared to Jacob, she frequently asks for help and loves to involve us in everything. ("Let's do our homework." "Let's play with our Barbies.") While

◆ "Large numbers of boys are being labelled as having literacy problems, either in their skills or attitudes, or both. Many boys who in fact read voraciously texts and forms unrecognized by school official curricula see themselves as not readers." (Young and Brozo, 2001, 316-325)

Jacob wants to do things on his own, Briana loves to share everything about her experiences. By bedtime, we know everything that has happened to her throughout the day.

If the classroom were a hockey game and each infraction of the rules of behaviour a penalty, the boys would always be in the penalty box. When it comes to the school environment—to learning, to good behaviour, and to positive classroom interactions—I think that most teachers will admit that the best players are girls. Certainly that is how many boys view school.

There Is Little Choice in What Boys Have to Read

A three-year Prince Edward Island study of personal reading choices of students in Grades 1 to 6 came up with some interesting statistics:

- ◆ Both boys and girls took out more fiction (60%) than non-fiction (40%) books from their school libraries.

“...almost all the books read by girls were narrative fiction. In contrast, just over half of what the boys read were novels; non-fiction, comics, joke books and picture books comprised the remainder.” (Gambell and Hunter, 2000, 699)

- ◆ Girls checked out more library books than boys but not “in significantly different numbers.”
- ◆ Boys took out about two-thirds of “all the information books...with less than one-third taken out by girls.” (Dorion, 2003)

Other researchers have found similar results (see Millard, 1997; Simpson, 1996; Smith and Wilhelm, 2002). Although boys like fiction, it is often a different type of fiction than interests girls. Also, boys tend to read a “wider number of genres over a broader range of topics” than girls (Simpson, 1996, 272). But

what is even more significant is that boys in general like to read material that is often *not* available in classrooms and school libraries: comics, sports, action and adventure magazines, fantasy, science fiction, and “blood and thunder” books (Millard, 1997; Wilson, 2005). Boys like to read books with short chapters. They like to read about humorous incidents and bodily functions. They enjoy biographies of sports heroes and popular personalities. But most interestingly, they want to read about things that are connected to the real world: how-to and informational books and magazines. In an Ontario school survey, “boys reported that they read a wide variety of materials outside of school, including newspapers (50%), comics (35%), manuals or instructions (25%), and magazines (64%). In addition, 82% of boys...wrote e-mail messages...” (*Me Read? No Way!*, 2004, 7).

However, the reading material that is most often found in schools is very different from these preferences. It is frequently made up of:

- ◆ books that relate to a traditional literature-based language arts curriculum.
- ◆ more fiction than nonfiction books.
- ◆ books that are chosen by teachers and librarians with a female perspective.

What is missing from this reading culture is what Smith and Wilhelm (2002) and others have declared important to both boy and girl readers: choice.

Girls have a wider range of reading choices than boys in many of our schools. As Hyatt (2002) and others have discovered, it is not necessarily true that boys do not read. Rather, “they do not like to read what they are presented with in the classroom” (*Literacy for Learning*, 2004). Boys are interested in subjects that are not always part of the school curriculum. Boys

like “sharks, snakes and dinosaurs while girls [like] pets and animals like deer, bears, and raccoons” (Dorion, 2003). It is not surprising that boys lose interest in what they perceive as “school reading.” Perhaps in the interest of boys, teachers should follow Ron Job’s and Mary Dayton-Sakari’s advice (Job and Dayton-Sakari, 2002, 13) for helping the reluctant reader: “If you buy only one book for your classroom, choose the Guinness Book of Records!”

Overcoming the Roadblocks to Literacy

Schools can be one of the main engines of social change. They can set the tone of society in ways no other institution can match. My faith in education is renewed daily by schools that provide an oasis of hope, where teachers create educational magic in their classrooms, where they incite and motivate their students to learn—and there are many such teachers and classrooms. However, the academic and societal challenges that confront boys in school settings suggest to me an urgent need for thoughtful intervention. We need initiatives that will help boys develop the skills, behaviours, and values necessary to perform at optimal levels in school and society.

Regrettably, I have found that more boys than girls believe school to be a waste of time. Educators must take note of why boys feel this way. They also must approach teaching literacy and subjects that are language-based in a way that suits both boys and girls. I realize that the solutions to the question, Why do boys have trouble with literacy? are not simple. But there are a number of approaches educators should take:

- ◆ Develop a multifaceted, comprehensive approach to the education of both boys and girls by acknowledging gender differences.
- ◆ Move beyond a “tips for teachers” approach and merge research-based knowledge with a comprehensive and thorough understanding of how boys and girls learn.
- ◆ Use research data—not stereotypes—to analyze how gender differences along with other factors affect educational outcomes.
- ◆ Develop a knowledge of subject disciplines that relates to student development.
- ◆ Identify and critically reflect on best teaching practices. Align high-quality teaching practices with assessment methods and curriculum initiatives.
- ◆ Encourage ongoing, substantive professional conversations and professional development.
- ◆ Ensure that strategies such as peer support, mentoring, cross-age tutoring, and buddy reading programs are developed in learning environments.
- ◆ Evaluate both the academic and social outcomes of programs or strategies.
- ◆ Nurture positive relationships among boys, girls, and adults of both sexes.
- ◆ On top of all that, celebrate the individual!

Although there are many difficulties facing educators as they try to encourage boys to become better readers, I hope to show that these challenges are not insurmountable.



1120 Birchmount Road, Toronto, ON M1K 5G4
(416) 752-9448 or 1-800-268-2222 • Fax (416) 752-8101 or 1-800-430-4445
E-mail: inquire@nelson.com • www.nelson.com

ISBN 0-17-629331-0



9 780176 293314